

George W. Bush's Role in the Hurricane Katrina Disaster

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During his two terms as president of the United States, George W. Bush was tested by a number of national tragedies, including the 9/11 terrorist attacks and Hurricane Katrina, which ravaged the U.S. Gulf Coast. These disasters and President Bush's responses to them helped shaped the president's legacy.

On January 20, 2001, Bush was sworn in as president. A few months later on September 11, he and his staff were met with the enormous task of dealing with the terrorist attacks. The attacks killed more than 3,000 Americans and injured many others. The president's response to these attacks helped create the Department of Homeland Security and launch a war on terror.

In 2004 Bush was reelected, and within a year, he was again faced with a national disaster. Hurricane Katrina made landfall in Florida on August 25, 2005, but the wrath of this storm would not be fully seen or felt until it hit the Gulf Coast on August 29. When the storm came ashore, it was still a Category 3 hurricane with winds of approximately 125 miles per hour. After the hurricane was over, more than 1,800 people were dead, residential areas all along the coast were decimated, and the cost of the destruction reached well into the tens of billions of dollars.

Hurricane Katrina

Described by the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) as the "most destructive hurricane ever to strike the United States," Katrina wreaked havoc across the Gulf Coast states of Louisiana, Alabama, and Mississippi. Although other hurricanes, such as Hurricane Andrew in 1992, produced stronger winds, Katrina did more damage and cost twice as much in insured losses than any other hurricane on record.

Katrina began as a tropical depression near the Bahamas on August 23, 2005. It soon strengthened into a tropical storm, and, by the time it hit Florida on August 25, Katrina was a Category 1 hurricane. It passed through the Florida areas of Hallandale Beach and North Miami Beach with wind speeds between eighty and ninety miles an hour. After spending several hours over land, Katrina's winds began to diminish slightly, but once the storm reached the warm waters of the Gulf of Mexico, it regained hurricane status.

Once in the Gulf of Mexico, Katrina moved northward and gained intensity, with winds of more than 170 miles per hour, making it a Category 5 hurricane. When Katrina reached land on the morning of August 29, it was classified as a Category 3 storm, with wind speeds of 125 miles per hour. During the storm, areas of Louisiana experienced rainfall measurements of one inch per hour, and some areas received a total of more than eight inches of rain.

The combination of rain and high winds caused the levees along to the coast to break, which allowed more than twenty feet of water to descend upon New Orleans. Because of the levee failure, most of the city was underwater on August 31. The devastation of the flooding, the high death toll, and numerous power outages turned the city into a disaster area.

Although the states along the Gulf Coast incurred most of the damage from the storm, other areas were also affected. Flooding and tornadoes from Katrina occurred in Georgia and in the Ohio Valley.

President Bush and Katrina

As Hurricane Katrina moved toward Louisiana on August 26, government officials started to realize the possible damage the storm could cause. In response to these reports, President Bush activated the National Response Plan and declared a federal emergency in Louisiana. Since Bush declared an emergency, the government released federal funds to help provide emergency services in the area. On August 28, President Bush contacted Kathleen Blanco, the governor of Louisiana, and advised her to evacuate the city of New Orleans. The storm hit and devastated the area the following day.

At the time the storm hit the Gulf Coast, President Bush was on vacation in Texas. He remained in Texas and tried to control the situation on the coast from his vacation spot. Later, critics of the president disapproved of his staying in Texas while the storm ravaged the coast. On the following Wednesday, Bush returned to Washington, D.C., taking a detour to fly over the areas affected by the hurricane. Critics questioned why the president did not stop to survey the damage in person. On September 2, 2005, Bush did visit the areas destroyed by Katrina, beginning with Mobile, Alabama, and ending in New Orleans, Louisiana. Some analysts criticized the president's response to the storm as being "casual" or "careless."

Almost two weeks later, Bush addressed the nation from New Orleans about the hurricane relief efforts. During this September 15 speech, Bush announced that utility companies had restored electricity throughout most of Mississippi and that the levees in New Orleans were repaired. The president also said, however, that much more work had to be done in the area. He also acknowledged the people who died, who lost their loved ones, or who lost their homes. He also focused on beginning the rebuilding efforts in the area and providing the remaining victims with food, clothing, shelter, and other necessities.

The president also assured victims that they would receive Social Security checks to help them through the difficult time. He stated the government would give monetary assistance to all the individuals living in the affected areas. Furthermore, the speech assured the area would get more job training. Despite the president's speech, the Worker Recovery Act and Urban Homesteading Act (both acts meant to help hurricane victims) never became law.

The one piece of legislation that Bush proposed during this speech that did become law was the Gulf Opportunity Zone Act, which helped create incentives for businesses to move back into the affected areas to create jobs. It also provided tax relief, loans, and loan guarantees for small business owners. The government granted more than \$60 billion for relief after the storm.

President Bush also declared that September 16 would be the National Day of Prayer and Remembrance for the Victims of Hurricane Katrina. During his speech, he also implored all Americans do their part to help the victims of the storm.

The Future of Emergency Evacuations

During and after Hurricane Katrina, President Bush and other government officials were harshly criticized because Americans believed they waited too long to give the appropriate help to the Gulf Coast. Claims of inaction even led to investigations and reviews of government policy. For example, the Department of Homeland Security reviewed emergency evacuations plans for all major U.S. cities. Bush responded to the reviews and investigations by saying they would help America be better prepared for future disasters.

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